

— Coalition Team Clears Land Mines

Story and Photos By
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Officials estimate that more than 10 million mines are scattered throughout Afghanistan. Clearing them from areas in which coalition forces operate is a vital — and potentially deadly — mission.



DUST clouds reached high into the sky as large metal spikes rotating from the mine-clearing flail dug deeper into the orange dirt outside Afghanistan's Kandahar International Airport.

According to the United Nations' Mine Action Program for Afghanistan, landmines and unexploded ordnance contaminate some 724 million square meters of land. Officials estimate that more than 10 million mines are scattered throughout the country. One of the most heavily mined provinces is Kandahar.

Since January, Norway's demining team has been clearing mines inside the Kandahar airport's perimeter, occupied now by elements of the 101st Airborne Division from Fort Campbell, Ky.

"So far we've found hundreds of mines inside the airfield," said Norwegian Maj. Prygve Enger, commander of the 16-man demining team. "The

Blue-painted rocks mark a mine field near Kandahar's International Airport.



Giant dust clouds surround the Norwegian demining team's flail as it digs deep into the earth, clearing land mines within the perimeter of Afghanistan's Kandahar International Airport.

mines have not affected the airflow into the airport. But with so many people on the ground, we have to continuously clear out new ground to expand the area."

Enger said his team works on foot, using poles and metal detectors to find the mines. Once they identify a contaminated area, they send in the flail.

"This hard and dry terrain is a challenge for us," he said. "The barbed wire and craters around the area also create challenges. We must plan our missions very carefully."

He said it's safe working inside the flail. When the machine detonates anti-personnel mines, the operator doesn't feel them or see them because of all the dust the machine kicks up. When an anti-tank mine detonates, the operator feels it slightly and sees flames shoot



Norwegian Cpl. Dan Gspedal watches as SSG Troy Winders of Co. C, 326th Engr. Bn., prepares to ground-guide a bulldozer operator.

up into the air.

"This is a dangerous job," said Enger. "But we follow all the necessary safety procedures."

Two 101st Abn. Div. engineer platoons have been working with the Norwegians.

SSG Troy Winders of Company C, 326th Engineer Battalion, said the Norwegians cut a safe path with their mine flail. The American engineers follow with a bulldozer, flattening the

ground to lay protective fence around the perimeter.

"We're continuously expanding the perimeter of the airfield," he said. "The fence is the last stop for any intruder."

Winders said they work from sunrise to sunset and, because of the mine threat, never work at night.

"This is a great learning experience for us," said Winders. "I think the Norwegian team is also learning a bit from us. The bottom line is we're making things safe for our soldiers. That's our ultimate goal." □

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Soldiers clear mines in Kandahar